Introducing Transfer of Learning

MODULE TEXT

Transfer – A User's Guide, *Nelson Graff*   1

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1   I spent several years waiting tables as I worked my way through my undergraduate years in college and my teaching credential program. When I started teaching, I thought I'd forget all about waiting tables, but I discovered that I had developed skills waiting tables that I could use to be a better classroom teacher. In particular, as a waiter, I'd had to learn what Kounin calls "with-it-ness." If I was delivering food to one table or taking an order, I had to also notice what was happening at the other tables I was serving—did that woman need water or a coffee refill; had a couple just been seated; were plates ready to be cleared; was that man waiting for his check? In the classroom, I realized, I needed to be able to write on the board and know just what the thirty bodies behind me were doing. I needed to be able to kneel down to answer Jeff's question and notice whether Melanie and Andre were working or stuck. I had, without knowing the name for it, transferred my learning from waiting tables to teaching. If only it were always so easy!

2   I'll bet you've had similar experiences yourself. Perhaps you were playing a new sport (say, soccer) and realized that you were passing effectively. You may not have been taught to pass in the new sport, but you were able to do so because you had learned to pass well in another team sport. Unconsciously, you applied those skills. Or maybe you drew on what you've learned from playing with your cell phone to fix some problem you were having with your personal computer. In those cases, you also transferred your learning. Get the idea?

3   You are probably already familiar with the term *transfer*, whether you've transferred schools, transferred from one bus to another while using public transit, or transferred money from one account to another. You may even have heard of *transfer of learning*. It seems like a relatively simple concept—the idea is that you should be able to use in one context something that you learned in a different context like I used the with-it-ness I developed as a waiter in teaching. You have probably even had teachers ask you, "Didn't you learn this in your [fill in the blank] class?" Or even, "Don't you remember when we learned this last week?"

4   When teachers are asking those questions, they're illustrating that we don't always unconsciously apply what we've learned before to new situations. I remember when I taught high school English. My class spent considerable time working on analyzing evidence for a persuasive essay, and students seemed to really get it. Later in the year, when we were working on the literary analysis, I was surprised to find that my students seemed not to know how to analyze evidence. To me, the connections between analyzing evidence for arguments and literary analysis were obvious, but to my students, they were different essays and had no relationship to each other. I hope this example illustrates that although the transfer of learning seems like a simple concept; in practice, it's more complicated than we think. And research suggests that we do less of it than anyone would like (Haskell).

5   Why should you care? Well, remember how I remarked that you've probably transferred your learning unconsciously before? If you do so consciously, you have that many more opportunities to improve. Steve Stedman, in the article, "Why Study Rhetoric? Or, What Freestyle Rap Teaches Us about Writing," suggests that learning about rhetoric can make you a better freestyle rapper. While he's being somewhat tongue-in-cheek, I'm not. What you learn in school can help you be a better athlete or snap-chatter, or texter, or just about anything you can imagine. If you have the imagination and do the work to make it so. And what's more, paying attention to transfer can make your learning more enjoyable and purposeful. We've all had those moments in classes when we think (or say, if we're unrestrained), "When will I ever use this?" We've also all had moments when we struggled while learning something new. Learning to think about transfer can help in both of those circumstances to make learning more effective and more joyful. Stay tuned.

What Can I Do to Give Myself the Best Chance to Learn for Transfer?

Conditions for Transfer

6   Learning for transfer requires more of you than just sitting in class and listening, or cramming for a test and then forgetting everything you learned. While scholars have composed different lists of the conditions necessary for you to transfer your learning, they have in common the idea that you have to work hard—to know the information/skill you hope to transfer and to pay attention to the possibility of transfer (Fletcher et al.; Haskell; Smith and Wilhelm; Yancey et al.).

7   The first step to learning for transfer is to recognize that you have choices. You can approach schooling as a series of obstacles to be circumvented or tasks to be completed, or you can decide to invest in your growth and learning. I say choices, plural because this isn't a choice you make once. It's one you get to re-make many times each day. Choosing to learn for transfer means making the decision, constantly, to do extra work, to experiment, and sometimes to fail.

Detect, Elect, Connect

8   Scholars Perkins and Salomon propose a framework for understanding the process of transfer of learning that can also serve as a guide for how to do it. They describe three "bridges" between past learning and new practice they call detect, elect, and connect. One must notice that there is a possibility for transfer (detect), decide to pursue that possibility (elect), and figure out the similarities and differences between the prior learning and the current situation in order to apply that learning to the current situation (connect).

9   Let's use an example from Wardle: "I learned to drive an automatic, and now I need to drive a stick shift in a country where I will be driving on the opposite side of the road." In order to succeed in this new driving situation, I have to think about what aspects of my experience will help me (detect). Then I have to try to apply those in the new situation (elect) and figure out how to do so (connect). I'm accustomed, for example, to having to watch more carefully for oncoming traffic in both directions when I'm making some turns, so I assume that the same will be true when I am driving on the opposite side of the road (detect). If I think carefully about this (elect), I realize that I have to do so because I'm crossing a lane of traffic going the opposite

way. While that's true for left turns when I'm driving on the right-hand side of the road, it will become true of right turns when I'm driving on the left-hand side of the road (connect).

10 Making the choice to *detect, elect, connect* means that as much as we are focused on present performance, we take the extra steps of looking both backward and forward. Doing so can boost learning in the present, make current learning more engaging, and help us use past learning. I'll explain.

Looking Backward

11 When we are in a situation we might call a "transfer situation," that is, a situation in which we may use the knowledge we have learned in previous situations, we have to look backward to our prior learning to see how it might apply. It is in these transfer situations that detect, elect, and connect apply most obviously. Let me give an example.

12 When you're reading a work of literature, and you're asked by your instructor to focus on characterization, you might initially think, "What's characterization? I'm learning a whole new way to think." Or you might notice that encountering a character in a book may be something like meeting a new person (detect). If you choose to pursue that connection (elect), you might consider the strategies you use to make initial judgments about people you meet—paying attention to their clothes and the way they carry themselves, listening to the words they use and how they treat people around them, watching how those they know react to them. So you might look for clues like those in the literature you're reading. Of course, you may also notice some differences—in person, you are doing the noticing for yourself; in literature, an author has made choices about what details to present to you. Also, you may not initially apply figurative language to your perception of a person face to face, but figurative language may play a significant role in literature, so you have to pay attention to those differences as well.

13 The point here is that detect, elect, and connect can help you relate what has been called your experience-based knowledge with scientific (or school-based) knowledge (Vygotsky) and learn the new information in a deeper and more meaningful way. And that can help you remember what you're learning and be more prepared to use it in the future because of the deeper your understanding, the more likely you will be able to apply that understanding in future situations (Haskell). Part of that deeper learning and the possibility of meaningful connection is the idea that your experiences should make sense, and everything you are learning in school (and outside of school) can help you make sense of them.

Looking Forward

14 Looking backward from a transfer situation can help you navigate the learning and the problem-solving in that situation. I think we can always build on our prior experiences even when we're learning something apparently new (like characterization). And as you've seen from my discussion above, making connections backward can help to deepen your learning. But whenever we're learning something new, we also have a chance to think about how we might apply that learning in the future.

15 Like looking backward, looking forward can help you deepen your understanding of your present learning. As you try to imagine applying current learning in new situations, you can discover new aspects of the concepts or practices you are learning. Perhaps as importantly, imagining applying your learning to new situations can help you discover misunderstandings you have in the current situation.

16 Think about reading. Most of us learned to read stories and literature. Because we were not focused on learning for transfer, we didn't necessarily think carefully about how the way we read was suited particularly to reading stories—most of us get used to the idea of starting at the beginning and reading through to the end and expecting authors to entertain us and engage us. Thinking about transfer while we work on our reading involves looking forward to what other kinds of reading we will be doing— will we be reading textbooks in mathematics, scientific articles, business proposals? As we think about reading those other kinds of texts we then ask questions—why do we read in this order for stories? In what order should we read other kinds of texts?

17 As you no doubt realize, applying detect, elect, and connect to future situations is an act not of memory but of imagination. Here, rather than detecting something you have learned that you might apply to the present situation, you are detecting a future situation in which you might apply your learning. Some researchers have written about this in terms of the bounded or expansive framing of instruction, with expansive framing promoting transfer. While your instructors frame the ways they present information, you can make your own choices about how you contextualize what you learn. For instance, Engle and colleagues suggest that faculty should, "Ask students to specify other settings in which the topic(s) have, are, or will be likely to come up in their lives" (219). When you are in class, you can, "Specify other settings in which the topic(s) have, are, or will be likely to come up in your life." In sum, using detect, elect, and connect to learn for transfer means paying attention, looking for connections, committing to deep understandings, and asking why.

Is It Worth the Effort?

18 When I was in graduate school, I worked in the campus writing center, helping students from all different majors with their writing assignments. The director of the writing center, Brad Hughes, frequently asked us to consider the following question during our tutoring: "Are you working to improve the writing or the writer?" He suggested that whatever work we did to help our colleagues improve their writing, it was more important that we help them improve as writers. What that meant is that we focused more on asking questions and teaching than we did on correcting grammar and telling writers what to change.

19 You get to ask a similar question of yourself: Are you working on a single assignment or focusing on a single class, or are you working to develop yourself— as a human being, a scholar, a [whatever you hope to become]? If you can move from answering the former to answering the latter, the extra work to learn for transfer will seem worth it. Perhaps as importantly, learning for transfer can make learning more joyful and engaging, and it can help you improve your performance in everything you do.

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